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The Honorable Melvin R. Laird
The Secretary of Defense
GACarver, Jr.

Attached is an informal look at the question you asked on 10 January regarding the political consequences of a Lao government call for a cessation of U.S. and GVN activity on or over Laotian territory assuming that the U.S. and GVN did not comply.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Melvin R. Laird
The Secretary of Defense

SUBJECT : Implications of a Lao Request that U.S. and
GVN Military Activity in Laos be Halted

1. We assume, per your request, that Souvanna Phouma or a successor publicly calls for a total bombing halt in Laos and for cessation of South Vietnamese air and ground incursions as well. We further assume that the U.S. (and Saigon) refuse to comply with this Lao request. This memorandum assesses the implications of such a situation.

Implications in Laos

2. If Souvanna himself asked for the halt of allied activity, the most significant immediate problem would arise in Laos. Souvanna's move would almost certainly generate a political confrontation with the Lao military leadership and associated rightist clans who presently tolerate him only at the insistence of the U.S. In the assumed circumstances, at least some of the Lao generals would choose to jump to the conclusion that the U.S., at least privately, would approve of their moving against Souvanna. (The generals would probably sound out the U.S. Mission in Vientiane before doing anything concrete, but this degree of prudence on their part can not be guaranteed since they might want to rationalize that the U.S. would prefer for them to act first and ask later.)

3. If Souvanna were removed swiftly and without excessive fuss, the political situation might soon return to what passes for normalcy in Laos. But if the generals were divided or irresolute, perhaps because of uncertainty as to the U.S. position, factional rivalries would probably surface and could result in civil unrest in such towns as Vientiane or Luang Prabang.

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4. The circumstances attending Souvanna's statement would be important. For example, if it were made in the context of a reasonably attractive deal with Hanoi and at a time of manifest military disaster for Laos, Souvanna might find support for his move even in Lao military circles. For the most part, however, the generals would view Souvanna's move to accommodate the Communists as a threat to themselves, their positions, and to the continued flow of U.S. funds and equipment to the Lao armies.

5. The short-term military consequences of any rightist takeover in Laos would probably be limited. Hanoi might cast off self-imposed restraints and try to seize such points as Luang Prabang or Vang Vieng, particularly if encouraged by the spectacle of unsettled conditions in Vientiane. Hanoi might calculate that such actions could create the impression that Souvanna's return was necessary to stabilize the military situation. But a Hanoi decision to move so boldly in Laos would also depend on the disposition of Communist forces and the time of year that the scenario under consideration took place.

6. On the political side, Hanoi's attitude would depend greatly on how it read the intentions of the new leaders in Vientiane and those of the U.S. as well. If Vientiane and Washington expressed continued support for the 1962 Accords on Laos and the idea of a future negotiated settlement with Communist participation in the government, Hanoi (with Peking and Moscow following suit) would probably stop short of setting up a rump Lao government and disavowing the 1962 agreement. If the new leaders in Vientiane themselves disavowed "neutrality" and the 1962 framework, Hanoi might be inclined to break with Vientiane and set up a Cambodian-style government. Even so, the record of the past nine years indicates clearly that North Vietnam would be most reluctant to give up the political advantage it now holds in the Laos situation -- i.e., international acknowledgement that the pro-Communist Neo Lao Hak Sat has a legitimate place in the government of Laos.

7. In any event, the Communists would, of course, make every effort to get political and propaganda mileage out of what they would describe as the brazen dismissal of Souvanna by the U.S. and its prolongation of the war in Laos. Indeed, one of the international political consequences of the assumed scenario would be the increased credibility of Hanoi's longstanding contention that only the U.S. stands as an obstacle to peaceful resolution of

the war in Laos. Opponents of the U.S. position -- foreign and domestic -- would doubtless make political mileage in their continuing effort to pressure the U.S. into cessation of all bombing in Indochina.

Implications for the Allies

8. The implications for U.S. allies in Indochina would vary. Saigon's major concern, of course, would be the congressional reaction in the U.S. Aside from this, Saigon would chalk up Souvanna's action as a political-propaganda setback likely to have some adverse impact on domestic morale, but the South Vietnamese would foresee no major or immediate military consequences so long as the U.S. appeared firmly committed to continued air action in the southern corridor. Souvanna's statement regarding ARVN ground incursions would probably cause little concern. It would be ignored; and, in any case, Saigon probably plans no actions in Laos beyond relatively small harassing operations during the remainder of this dry season.

9. Phnom Penh's leaders share certain attitudes with the RLG. Like the Lao, they see Cambodia's salvation ultimately in some sort of greater power understanding endorsing their independence and neutrality. In the assumed situation, therefore, they would pay close attention to any sign that the major powers were moving away from accommodation in Indochina toward some sort of last-ditch military struggle. At the same time, the Cambodian leadership would also grow more fearful of an eventual reversal of U.S. bombing policy in Laos, a move which would leave Cambodia even more exposed to North Vietnamese infiltration.

10. Thailand would also be affected. Bangkok sees Laos as its first line of defense and has helped defend it. Souvanna's policy shift would compel the Thai to review their own military position in Laos. Almost certainly, Bangkok's first step would be to assist in any right-wing Lao effort to oust Souvanna. And Bangkok would strongly favor a continuation of U.S. bombing in Laos. Souvanna's action would be seen as a clear setback for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, but its effect would be mitigated if the U.S. continued its bombing policy. Indeed, Thai leaders might be reassured that the U.S. was taking a tough line despite the international and domestic consequences.

Implications if a Successor Demanded a Halt

11. If a successor to Souvanna demanded a halt to U.S. and GVN military activity in Laos, how would the implications differ from those

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discussed above? In the immediate future, there appears to be only one scenario under which a successor to Souvanna might emerge who would make such a demand. This would be a situation in which the Communists had won military victories in Laos of such scope that Souvanna's government were replaced by one subservient to the Communists. If so, we would have a totally new situation in Laos.

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